ROUNDTABLE INSIGHTS:

Connecting Dots:
Building A Human-Centric
Entrepreneurial Nation

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INTRODUCTION

CONNECTING DOTS: BUILDING A HUMAN-CENTRIC ENTREPRENEURIAL NATION

The roundtable on **Connecting Dots: Building a Human-Centric Entrepreneurial Nation** gathered voices from government, NGOs, academia, and social enterprises to explore a fundamental question:

> **How do we build an entrepreneurial ecosystem that places people, not programmes, at its centre?**

The discussion, guided by **Professor Sreevas Sahasranamam** from the University of Glasgow, offered not just answers but provocations that challenge the way we think about development, dependency, and empowerment.

HUMAN-CENTRIC INNOVATION BEGINS WITH EMPATHY

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HUMAN-CENTRIC INNOVATION BEGINS WITH EMPATHY

"Communities in the South may not articulate the SDGs, but they live them every day"

Professor Sreevas Sahasranamam

Professor Sreevas opened with a story from Sabah; Tonibung's micro-hydro systems that bring power to flood-prone rural communities. The story was not about technology and policy frameworks, but about people and innovation that is designed around lived realities.

He reminded us that while the Global North talks about sustainability, the Global South lives it.

This reflection reframed sustainability not as a language of policies and frameworks, but as a practice rooted in necessity, resilience, and community-led problem solving.

FROM DEPENDENCY TO SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

02
FROM DEPENDENCY TO SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

One of the most resonant insights was on the need to move from dependency to shared ownership.

Through the example of the Beggars Corporation, an initiative that transforms beggars into entrepreneurs, Professor Sreevas illustrated how empathy can be structured into systems.

In this model, ownership in the ventures they create hold by:

51% Rehabilitated Participants

alongside:

25% Parent Organisation **& 24%** Impact Investors

INSKEN
INSTITUT KEUSAHAWANAN NEGARA

Additional matters that were discussed:

Social procurement tends to drive accountability by shifting responsibility to corporates, which should not always be the case.

NGOs must evolve towards sustainable business models

External capital is reframed not as charity, but as impact investment capital that is compassionate, yet accountable.

Introduction of **venture philanthropy,** blending investment, financing, and research — can sustain long-term impact.

"Dependency models perpetuate weakness, independence must be built deliberately"

Professor Sreevas Sahasranamam

This approach invites a mindset shift from aid to agency, from donors to partners, and from sustainability as a project to sustainability as shared purpose.

FROM DEPENDENCY TO SHARED RESPONSIBILITY
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VISIBILITY, DATA, AND THE MISSING MIDDLE

03
VISIBILITY, DATA, AND THE MISSING MIDDLE

Participants from across sectors noted that Malaysia's social enterprises and micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) are doing transformative work yet lack systematic visibility. Storytelling is strong, but structured data is weak and decentralised.

With 97% of businesses being micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME), most of them micro, Professor Sreevas called this "the missing middle" ; the space between smallness and scale. He proposed that institutions like INSKEN evolve from entry-level training providers into growth-stage enablers, helping enterprises move from capability-building to innovation readiness.

97%

Professor Sreevas proposed that institutions such as Institut Keusahawanan Negara (INSKEN) should transition from being providers of basic training to functioning as growth enablers, supporting enterprises in moving from capacity development towards innovation readiness. One potential approach is the integration of collective small-scale production to fulfil larger market demands.

Professor Sreevas Sahasranamam

VISIBILITY, DATA, AND THE MISSING MIDDLE
03

An integrated data ecosystem co-owned by government, academia, and private players could support better coordination, evidence-based policy, and investment confidence.

Intermediaries i.e corporates or government agencies could also play a role by aggregating for scale, considering most small ventures are not able to produce in large scale.

VALUES AS THE CURRENCY OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP

04
VALUES AS THE CURRENCY OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Sustainability, the group agreed, is no longer a niche. It is fast becoming the new language of business one defined not just by profit, but by purpose and transparency.

Global trends such as social procurement and digital product traceability are reshaping how value is measured. Companies like IKEA are embedding social enterprises into their supply chains, proving that inclusion and profitability can coexist. At the same time, Traceability and Digital Product Passports are emerging as powerful tools of accountability new regulations will soon require every product to disclose its environmental and social footprint, from sourcing to disposal.

As Professor Sreevas noted, these developments will make sustainability mainstream rather than exceptional.

One remark from the floor captured this evolving mindset perfectly:

"Social enterprises should not think about copyright, but about copy it right"

The insight is clear progress accelerates when we move from competition to collaboration, when knowledge is shared rather than owned, and when values themselves become the true currency of entrepreneurship.

DATA THAT BUILDS TRUST, NOT JUST EVIDENCE

05
DATA THAT BUILDS TRUST, NOT JUST EVIDENCE

"**Micro messages given consistently over a long period of time**"

Professor Sreevas Sahasranamam

A representative from a social-impact consultancy raised two recurring challenges:

1. **Policymakers often overlook ground-level data.**

2. **Rural communities remain disconnected from high-level topics like Artificial Intelligence (AI) and climate change when daily survival still dominates their concerns.**

Professor Sreevas responded that governments value longitudinal data, not snapshots; evidence that shows transformation over time rather than isolated outcomes. He proposed the use of Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) to demonstrate real impact, and urged a shift from one-off training sessions to long-term locally led learning. Entrepreneurship training, he added, is most effective when facilitated by trusted community figures in short, repeated formats rather than distant workshops.

05
DATA THAT BUILDS TRUST, NOT JUST EVIDENCE

Closing these gaps requires more than compelling stories; it requires credible data that serves both government planning and community empowerment. Achieving this demands coordinated effort among diverse stakeholders; something that is now entirely possible with the tools and technology we already have.

The discussion naturally evolved into the question of who owns the data that shapes these decisions. Participants explored the concept of Data Commons; locally governed yet nationally aggregated systems that protect community rights while ensuring transparency and trust. Such an approach reframes data from being an extractive tool to a shared resource for empowerment.

As a way forward, participants emphasised the importance of ongoing, cross-sectoral engagement that bridges **policymakers, academia, private sector, and community actors.** The goal is not merely to collect data, but to co-create understanding, ensuring that those most affected by decisions also help shape the knowledge that guides them.

The discussion further highlighted an important question:

Who should own the data that informs policy decisions and development planning?

TECHNOLOGY INCLUSION FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES

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"They don't need to know how blockchain works, they only need to scan a QR code"

Professor Sreevas Sahasranamam

Technology, when designed with empathy, can become a bridge rather than a barrier. Professor Sreevas shared examples from India where rural residents record local-language content to train artificial intelligence models, earning income while preserving their linguistic and cultural heritage.

He also illustrated how blockchain in agriculture has increased transparency across supply chains without demanding technical literacy from farmers.

The insight was clear: digital inclusion is not about transferring complexity but about designing technology that fits people's realities. When introduced gradually and built around local capacity, technology allows communities to move from mere participation to true ownership from being users of innovation to becoming creators within it.

POLICY AS A LIVING SYSTEM

Policy, as participants reflected, must move from being a static framework to a living system:

Listens

Adapts

Co-creates with the people it serves

An example from Sabah can be seen through the experience of the Sabah Creative Economy and Innovation Centre (SCENIC) in organising the Rural Social Enterprise Gathering (RSEG). State government recognition only came after international collaboration, reminding us that global partnerships can sometimes help open doors at the local level.

One of the participants said:

"Sometimes we must provoke in a good way, because that is how progress begins"

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POLICY AS A LIVING SYSTEM

How can academia connect with policymakers and entrepreneurs?

This discussion also raised several important questions:

How can we ensure policies move with the communities we serve?

The Ministry's announcement of Malaysia's first Social Enterprise Awards (MySEA) and the continuation of the SEMy2030 Policy mark an important step from normalisation to empowerment, with third-sector embedded in the upcoming 13th Malaysia Plan (RMK-13).

CLOSING REFLECTION

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CLOSING REFLECTION

The roundtable closed with a powerful truth:

"Real change must grow from the ground up"

Malaysia's strength lies not in any single institution, but in its collective will; a rare closeness between government, NGOs, and communities that the world could learn from.

By nurturing trust, data, and dignity, Malaysia can truly become a human-centric entrepreneurial nation already taking shape.